

‘Stability’ and ‘balance’: Using a Capabilities Approach to understand how positive AOD trajectories happen for young people

Joanne Bryant¹, Gabriel Caluzzi^{1, 2}

¹School of Social Sciences, University of NSW, Sydney Australia,

²Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia,

Presenter’s email: j.bryant@unsw.edu.au

Introduction In social policy and practice, there is growing interest in Capabilities Approaches (Sen 1999) which orient policy attention towards the opportunities and resources that align with clients’ specific values and aspirations. In this paper, we apply a Capabilities framework to young people’s experiences following AOD care to identify their aspirations and the real opportunities they have to achieve these.

Method We used modified life-history interviewing methods with 17 young people in NSW and Victoria who were in outreach after completing residential AOD care, asking them about aspirations and successes and ‘working back’ to identify the opportunities and supports that enabled these.

Key Findings Participants identified that achieving ‘stability’ in three key areas was highly valued: housing, mental health and employment. Participants identified the importance of housing that was not just materially adequate but safe, long term and appropriate given their past experiences of insecurity. They described the importance of trusted mental health care to improve their help-seeking, emotional management skills, and addressing challenges associated with neurodiversity. They also identified the importance of flexible employment that included advancement opportunities, not just casual work that had limited stability and which could work against the establishment of daily routines.

Discussions and Conclusions Expanding young people’s capabilities to do well after AOD care should not just focus on effective clinical interventions but also those areas that they reflectively value – housing, mental health support, and employment – areas that are not directly related to their substance use but are essential for long-term AOD management.

Implications for policy and practice.

A Capabilities Approach in AOD policy and service provision is a potentially useful alternative to current models because it focuses on directing limited resources towards the opportunities that clients’ value and aspire to, and building the enabling conditions to enable positive substance use trajectories post-service engagement.

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